



Focus Groups

Identification

Caregivers during a disaster should seek out users of services rather than wait to be sought. If you decide to start focus groups to help families in your community deal with stress, go out to neighborhoods and gathering places. Some tips to help you:



“During a disaster, caregivers should seek out users of services rather than wait to be sought.”

- Let children know you are interested in them.
- Check for understanding.
- Have respect for the child and the acceptance of the family.
- Communicate trust.
- Promise only what you can deliver.
- Communicate with parents that you are an informed authority.
- Listen carefully.
- Reflect feelings to be sure you understand.
- Focus on one problem at a time if there are multiple problems.
- Refer to other agencies when you are incapable or unqualified to handle a situation.

Be particularly aware of cultural cues.

Refusing assistance and denying that a problem exists when it does may be acceptable behaviors in the community culture. Often adults will seek help through their children. However, whatever assistance they decide to seek, you should respect their rights.

Parent Groups

Parents want to be informed about techniques for handling specific problems such as fears, anxieties, sleep problems, school difficulties and behavior problems. Parents may discuss their own fears as well as the group's. Parents can be encouraged to:

- Talk with their children about what happened.
- Talk about feelings.
- Not to dismiss a child's feelings.
- Reassure children of their safety.
- Hold and touch the child.
- Spend extra time with the child, play with the child.

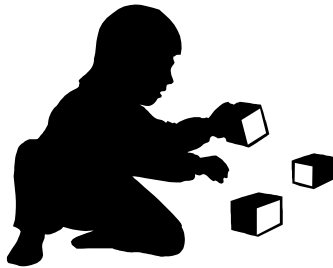
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Stress and Coping With Disaster: A Handbook Compiled Following the Midwest Flood of 1993 for Extension Professionals, compiled by Marty Baker and Ami O'Neill

- Allow the child to mourn over lost toys, lost blanket, lost home.
- Talk to child's teacher.
- Reassure parents that getting help is acceptable.

Children's Groups

Children can interact during group discussions and activities. The purpose is to recognize and validate feelings. Use discussions to provide facts. Address fears that the children might be dealing with. Give children some control and power. Ask the children to take turns being helpers. Provide various activities and allow choice. Some activity ideas are:



“Encourage children to express their feelings through play.”

- Drawing about experiences.
- Asking children to share what happened during the disaster.
- Reading books selected specifically for the audience (see section 19.14 for a list of children's books related to disaster).
- Act out through dramatic play — Stock a prop box with rain gear, boots, gloves, toy shovels, hats, pails, etc. You could use large boxes or designate specific areas in the room as shelters, feeding station, the Red Cross or an office.
- Select play materials as options for less verbal children. They might be able to express themselves through paint, clay, dolls, water, blocks, markers, paper, crayons and scissors.

Play

Playing is an important activity for children. Following a disaster, play may reveal a child's experiences and uncover feelings. Encourage children to express their feelings through play. Play rules:

- Play must be pleasurable, non-intrusive and non-directive (do not tell children how to play). Adults should get on the child's level. Being reflective of feelings is best.
- The child must be in control in a play setting and actively make decisions. The play environment should be a safe, accepting, supportive environment. Announce to children when play is about to end. Give the children time for transition.
- Play is allowed to have unhappy endings. It should be the feelings associated with the play (not the transition or adult intervention) that creates sadness.
- After children become comfortable in play, the adult (or the leader) needs to stand back and observe children's actions and interactions. The adult is active when the children want for the adult to be active.

- The adult should learn to ask open-ended questions such as, "What happens then?" or "How would that make you feel?" Allow children to ask questions.
- Parents can learn to observe and play with the children during these sessions as well. Parents should abide by the play rules and allow children control of the play time.

Age-specific Interventions for Children

- Preschoolers
 - Drawing.
 - Telling stories for adult to record.
 - Coloring books on disasters.
 - Doll and toy play.
 - Reading books.
 - Group games.
 - Talking in groups about safety and protection.
 - Paint, markers and clay play.
- Elementary School-Age
 - Drawing.
 - Telling stories.
 - Writing stories.
 - Dramatic play/prop box.
 - School study projects.
 - Reading stories about human plight in disasters.
- Preadolescent and Adolescents
 - Stories and essays.
 - Books on disaster.
 - Creating a play about disaster.
 - Dramatic play through a prop box with specific items.
 - School projects on natural or social sciences.
 - Materials about disaster safety, family and community protection, preparation.
 - Community activity to assist in reconstruction.



"Parents should abide by the play rules and allow children to control the play time."